

THREE BY THREE: CAREERS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Anne Roberts, ChLA 2009*

RESUMEN

El relato de una vida entera influenciada por la pasión a la lectura y cómo la autora, en su desempeño profesional fue capaz de traslapar su bagaje cultural para impulsar importantes proyectos dentro de la LIJ como fueron el de literariedad pictórica, géneros en los libros ilustrados y hábitos de lectura de los Gigantes de Nueva York.

ABSTRACT

The story of a whole life influenced by a passion to read. It shows how the author, in her career was able to overlap all her cultural background to promote important projects in children's literature, some of them were Pictorial Literacy, Genres in Picture Books and Reading Habits of the New York Giants.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Testimonio sobre la LIJ, desempeño profesional en literatura infantil y juvenil, ilustradores de LIJ, proyectos en la LIJ premios en la LIJ, bibliotecaria académica, bibliotecaria pública, literatura infantil, ilustración de libros para niños, literariedad, libros ilustrados para niños.

KEY WORDS

Testimony on Children's Literature, Career on Children's Literature, Illustrators on Children's Literature, Projects on Children's Literature, Awards on Children's Literature, Academic Librarianship, Public Librarianship, Children's Literature, Children's Book Illustration, Literacy, Children's Picture Books.

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It is such a pleasure to be here with Sue Bottigheimer and Linnea Hendrickson, speaking about our careers in children's literature. Sue and I go back to Berkeley in the late 1950's when our husbands were graduate students in the history department there, and I was busily producing four babies –not finishing my degrees until much later at the University at Albany. Linnea and I have parallel career histories in librarianship– user education, bibliographic instruction –and in education– teaching courses in children's literature to teachers and librarians. The two of them have carved out substantial scholarship in the field –Linnea with her bibliography, *CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A GUIDE TO THE CRITICISM*, 1987; and Sue with her many scholarly monographs on the Grimms, children's bibles, and fairy tales. My approach has been much more casual and broader –trying to show teachers how children's literature has had a long and solid history– and keeping them apprised of the current generation of authors and illustrators who build on those who went before. I have always connected with children's books as an academic librarian, a professor of children's literature, and a retired researcher/lecturer.

As a child I was not only read to by my mother, but she wrote stories about me and my brother. He was four years older than I and had contracted juvenile diabetes at age three. To massage his thighs where the insulin went in, the doctor suggested horseback riding–so the two of us got ponies and road every day. Mother hired a cowboy, "Red" who was our companion. Her stories, *THE ENCHANTED COWBOY*, featured Red getting a 'faraway look in his eye' and then magical events happened. We joined a circus, rode in a blimp, rode under the sea playing with a merboy and mergirl, and many other things. My fifth grade teacher read these stories aloud, captivating my classmates. Her father was a writer, so my mother thought she was one too –none of her work was ever published– I did self-publish the stories for my own children and grandchildren.

There was an odd tall man I saw in La Jolla, where I grew up, everyday, riding by his pink cement concrete house on my way to Mount Soledad. It turned out it was Ted Geisel–Dr. Seuss; I had no idea until I had my own children and read his books to them that Ted Geisel was that man! La Jolla was a small village during the war; my mother took me to school in a pony cart since

there was a gas shortage and we lived outside of town. But we all walked to the local public library from school, and I recall all of my classmates and myself included, reading books, and devouring them avidly. My mother would frequently have to call me to supper many times, saying, “get your head out of that book and come and eat.”

As a mother I read to my four children avidly –all the time– morning, noon, and night –and discovered my grandfather, William John Hopkins, who had written many books for children, including *THE SANDMAN AND HIS FARM STORIES*, *THE SANDMAN AND HIS SEA STORIES*, *THAR¹ SHE BLOWS!*, and *THE DOERS*. This grandfather, who died before I was born, also wrote charming nostalgic novels about New England characters in their settings. I had an interest in writers who wrote for adults and children and did early seminar papers for my BA degree in 1966. I actually did a study of his books for my MLS library degree in 1967. I was interested in New England writers who wrote for both: adults and children, and in my MA degree in 1975, I explored some of those writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott. For my doctorate degree in 1982, I focused on the ‘golden age of American children’s books’ from the Civil War through World War II. Thus I had an awareness and keen interest in all of children’s books –the many worlds they encompass and describe.

I became friendly with Marcia Brown’s sister, Janet Maly, and, discovering that Marcia had attended the University at Albany when she was an undergraduate –it was New York State College for Teachers in those days– I wooed her, persuading her to give her papers to our university library. She had won the Caldecott many times over and became a close friend. Thus began my keen interest in the art of the picture book, and I studied seriously in this field, also teaching courses for teachers in this field. It turns out that Albany has a wonderful set of both children’s book illustrators and authors, and soon the Children’s Literature Connection was founded, bringing together authors, illustrators, teachers, librarians, and parents –all interested in children’s books. We

¹ N. del T. “Thar” is colloquial for “There”. In *Moby Dick* or other whaling adventures, they would call out “There she blows” when they saw a whale – but if the person was from New England, like the grandfather of the essayist, it sounded “Thar”

held conferences, symposia, and workshops, stimulating a wide interest in the field. I also did a study of the illustrator who won the first Caldecott, Dorothy Lathrop, for her *ANIMALS OF THE BIBLE*, and an Albany native (1890-1980).

We came to Albany in 1963 from Berkeley, California; and after a few years I found the harsh winters unbearable. So I jumped at the chance to vacation with anthropology friends in Barbados. There I discovered a 1904 *TROPICAL ALPHABET* book, written by Gertrude Carter, married to the Governor General of Barbados. Lady Carter wrote this book for all the colonial children living in the West Indies, and it is also illustrated by Gertrude. In it she depicts the flora and fauna of the island. I later met Lucille Fraser Burkett who had written *BARBADIAN FAIRY TALES* in the 1950's, depicting 'white Barbadians' with a blonde child as the protagonist, but also dwelling on the flora and fauna of the island. I published both of these books because of my strong interest in children's literature, feeling they both reflected their times and settings so well.

As an academic librarian I used children's books as touchstones for many of the talks gave in reference librarianship: Lewis Carroll's *THE HUNTING OF THE SNARK*, Wally Piper's *THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD*, and Maurice Sendak's *OUTSIDE OVER THERE* were just some of the titles I referred to –children's books were always on my mind!

After I left my academic library career (1967-1989) I began teaching children's literature to graduate teachers in the university's reading department (1989-2002) and offered a wide variety of courses in addition to the general 'children's literature' survey course. Historical fiction, non fiction, the picture book, memoirs and diaries, folklore, fairy tales –were just some of the courses I was able to offer to my teachers, who were most eager audiences. Along with my husband, I offered field trips and daylong seminars on art and children's books and we visited museums in Boston, New York, Williamstown, and around the Albany area. I also received a National Endowment for the Humanities Award for *THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BEAUTIFUL: STRONG FEMALE FIGURES IN FOLK AND FAIRY TALES*, incorporating Sue Bottigheimer and her work on fairy tales in that grant, thus reconnecting our two families. The grant included an inner city school with primarily black children, and a rural country school with mostly white

children, and the teachers. The grant brought in humanities scholars to interact with the teachers –Jack Zipes was one of the speakers– plus many others. It was a most successful venture. I went on to get more grants on PICTORIAL LITERACY, and GENDERS IN PICTURE BOOKS, using classrooms of children in the first and second grades and kindergartens to try and observe when and how they notice gender differences in characters. I greatly expanded my knowledge of contemporary picture books.

I recall my first ChLA Conference in San Diego in 1989; I had just started teaching and we were visiting our families (my husband and I are both from Southern California) and I coincided our visit with the conference. It was as if I'd found my new home! I completely resonated with all the people I met there; college and university teachers of children's literature. I vividly remember being in the swimming pool with two adorable children, laughing and talking with them –it turned out they were Psyche and Jesse– Linnea's two. Linnea and I soon connected, and it is to her that I owe my involvement in ChLA –serving on committees, writing papers, and attending all the conferences, both nationally and internationally. I was as engaged in this new field as I had been as an academic librarian. I met some wonderful new friends who have become part of my life. I travelled to France, England, and New Mexico for IBBY as well.

I also attended CLNE, Children's Literature New England, which came out of the Simmons College program and included high school and elementary teachers as well as librarians and people who teach about children's books. One of the founders was Gregory Maguire of WICKED fame and also from Albany! Many of the participants came from private schools, thus giving us another dimension to the atmosphere. Many people from England also attended, as well as from other countries –giving this group, along with CHLA, an international flavor. And I was travelling quite a bit, collecting children's books wherever I went: Denmark, Ireland, England, Scotland, Greece, Turkey, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, France, Romania, Russia, and Hungary. I was always curious what children were reading all over the world.

I met Thomas Locker just as I began teaching and just as he began writing and illustrating children's books, and we became close friends. His partner, Candace Christiansen, continues to work with schools and children after his tragic early death from

a heart attack. He painted in the style of the Dutch masters, using oil, and wanted to show children the beauty of the world. His work is also reminiscent of the Hudson River School of painting. He was an unusual children's book illustrator, coming out of the fine art field. Other illustrators closeby were Thor and Sylvie Wickstrom, and Bruce Hiscock –using watercolor and then the computer. Jeffrey Scherer was one of the first to illustrate books with computer art. There are also a large number of authors in the Albany area, including the founders of the Children's Literature Connection, Jennifer Armstrong and Karen Beil. Thus the field was thriving and in an exciting place as I began my teaching career –this was indeed fortunate for me– to have all of these wonderful resources. Denise McCoy, a book store owner, wanted me to work with her, so she and I would give workshops all over the place –to schools– I would do the background and history of the books (history, science, fiction, poetry) and then she would bring in the current contemporary authors and artists. It was a tragic loss to us all when she died unexpectedly of a heart attack.

We initiated an award in Denise's name, focusing on humor –Philip Pullman was the first recipient. It has become a most successful award to give in her honor. My other award experience was being on the Phoenix Committee, of CHLA. This group recognizes a book that is twenty years old and has stood the test of time but has never received an award. I met so many wonderful authors through this committee: Alan Garner, Nina Bawden, Jane Gardam, Robert Cormier, Katherine Paterson, Lawrence Yep, Mollie Hunter, Monica Hughes, Margaret Mahy, Francesca Lia Block, and Peter Dickinson.

I recall one very successful course on fantasy, "From Alice to Harry," offered during summer school and gathering all kinds of interested people who wanted to reread Lewis Carroll and read the new Harry Potter books. And one summer my nonfiction class did a sweet book on TEACHERS ARE GIANTS TOO! when the New York Giants came to Albany for their camp. I soon met the coach, and he agreed to let us interview about twenty of the players –we were interested in their reading habits– it was a wonderful project and the University at Albany President, Karen Hitchcock, ordered 500 copies to distribute as a town/

gown token. I became quite friendly with Coach Dan Reeves and the owner, Wellington Mara, so again, another wonderful experience coming out of a class I was teaching.

But the reading department, a small graduate department only, soon felt heir to the standards mania that enveloped education, so children's literature was a stepchild and soon waned from the curriculum. I still travelled extensively in those days –collecting children's books from whatever countries I visited, and sharing them with my students. I served on many degree committees and spent time in schools, reading and sharing books with students and teachers. I gave workshops for the inner city schools, donating books to the volunteers. Many of the volunteers were social friends of mine, while many of their teachers were former students, so it was a happy marriage of books and people all for children. When our area was devastated by the floods from Hurricane Irene, I was able to help restore some of the collections of children's books through my donations of books to the public library system –many ended up on Schoharie, which was particularly ravaged by the floods and weather.

It was a wonderful career, and I still give talks and lectures on the subject whenever I am asked. Most recently I was part of the Ringling Museum lecture series and spoke on "The Golden Age of Children's Book Illustration" in conjunction with a panel on Willy Pogany, a muralist and decorator of the Ringling Museum's great house –Pogany also illustrated many children's books– it was a wonderful way to contribute some new knowledge to a most interesting audience. And I have taught some courses to retired adults through the Longboat Key Education Center; one course focused on young adult literature and another on the classics of children's literature –adults love to read books from their childhoods or books they may have missed growing up. And the entire field of young adult literature is largely lost on most people today, so it's been exciting for me to see people respond so positively to these books.

I suppose I've always had a sense of 'vocation' in my teaching of children's books and involvement with the literature. I feel the world would be a far better place if our current leaders had read the classic books that I grew up with and that I've tried to introduce my students to, in addition to the new books written and illustrated for children.

Our most involved and sympathetic audience member was Alejandra, and It is for her that I've tried to recapture my thoughts and words that she first heard in Charlotte, North Carolina in June of 2009. She is the type of student I think that all of us—Sue, Linnea, and I—are most committed to—the dedicated returning adult learner who discovers anew what it means to be a learner and scholar in today's world. That she found her voice in children's literature is a testament to her and to the field.